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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001186

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KWWW](#) [ETRD](#) [EAID](#) [MV](#)
SUBJECT: MALDIVES: PRESIDENT GAYOOM SAYS REFERENDUM
"GENERALLY FREE AND FAIR"; OPPOSITION SAYS NUMBERS
IMPOSSIBLY HIGH; VPP FOR MALDIVES LAUNCHED

REF: A. COLOMBO 1161
[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1166
[1](#)C. COLOMBO 1184

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Maldives President Gayoom told Ambassador August 28 that the country's August 18 referendum had been "well-organized," "in general, free and fair," and had produced an outcome of 62 percent in favor of a "U.S.-style" presidential system. Opposition Maldives Democratic Party leaders, however, insisted to the Ambassador that the government's vote counts totaled more ballots than could possibly have been cast. Ambassador urged them not to give up on the democratic process, and to use lessons from the referendum to insist on more accountable voting procedures in the presidential elections that will likely occur next year. Ambassador urged both the President and the opposition to make early plans to invite the international community to monitor what would be Maldives' first-ever presidential elections.

[1](#)2. (U) Summary, cont'd: While in Maldives, the Ambassador also launched Embassy Colombo's Virtual Presence Post dedicated to Maldives; met U.S. and foreign companies exhibiting U.S. products at the American Pavilion within Maldives' largest annual trade show; advocated with the President and others for a proposed \$93 million investment using U.S. windpower technology; and broke ground for two USAID water desalination projects as part of tsunami reconstruction on two islands (septel). End summary.

PRESIDENT SAYS REFERENDUM FAIR, REFORM TO CONTINUE

[1](#)3. (C) Ambassador Blake called on Maldives President Gayoom at the Presidential Palace in Male' August 28. Gayoom, appearing relaxed and jovial and accompanied by Minister for Presidential Affairs Mohamed Hussain and Deputy Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon (who is also Gayoom's daughter), told Ambassador that he expected the results of the August 18 national referendum on system of government to be confirmed later that day by the Election Commission. The president expected the official results to indicate that 62 percent of Maldivians supported retaining the country's executive presidency, rather than switching to a purely parliamentary

system of government. (Note: The eleven-member committee of the Special Majlis still has not certified the results.) Gayoom told Ambassador he supported the presidential system because it would limit an elected executive's tenure to a maximum of two five-year terms, create separation of executive and legislative power, and give people a say in electing their national leader.

14. (C) The Ambassador noted that the opposition alleged there had been irregularities in the referendum (ref A). "They would," replied the president. He countered that the opposition was itself responsible for irregularities like voter intimidation and attacking a minister's car. Overall, Gayoom contended, the election was "well-organized" and "in general, free and fair." He urged the opposition to accept the results in order not to bog down the reform process, which would continue despite the recent resignations of the three main reformists in the cabinet (refs A and B; ref C reports Ambassador's discussion with the former Foreign Minister, Justice Minister, and Attorney General). The draft constitution, Gayoom explained, would now incorporate clauses for a presidential system, and would be presented to the Special Majlis soon, with a goal of adopting it by November 30. Gayoom hoped the opposition would support the new constitution, which would increase transparency, accountability, and democracy -- "it's what they want," he said.

WILL "THINK ABOUT" OBSERVERS FOR 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

15. (C) Following adoption of the constitution, the parliament would proceed with drafting an election law so that a

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presidential election could be held by about September or October 2008, according to Gayoom. In response to the Ambassador's question, Gayoom said he would run for president because his party had elected him its leader and he was therefore required to be its candidate. The Ambassador said it would be important to have international observers monitor the presidential election, to help avoid a contested outcome like that surrounding the recent referendum. He urged the president to invite, with plenty of lead time, foreign governments and civil society organizations to send observers. The Ambassador also recommended that the government take seriously the opposition's allegations of irregularities in the referendum, so as to improve procedures for the presidential election. Gayoom thanked the Ambassador for the suggestions, which he said "we will think about."

OPPOSITION CERTAIN NUMBERS WERE ALTERED; PESSIMISTIC ABOUT DEMOCRATIC PROSPECTS

16. (C) Following his meeting with Gayoom, the Ambassador called on opposition Maldives Democratic Party leaders, who were frustrated and angry in the belief that the government must have falsified the tallies in the referendum. Party leader Nasheed explained that MDP inquiries showed that the voter rolls included over 10,000 deceased persons and 15,000 persons outside the country. This made the government's claim that 151,000 out of 189,000 eligible voters had voted nearly impossible. Were the discrepancies sufficient to have affected the result of the referendum? the Ambassador asked. "Too close to call," Nasheed said. (Note: The UNDP Deputy Resident Representative and her human rights officer later told Ambassador that they thought the outcome of the referendum probably had not been affected by vote count irregularities. Former Foreign Minister Shaheed also agreed with this assessment.)

17. (C) The Ambassador urged the opposition to continue working within the political system to effect reform. "You can do better from inside, rather than letting the process proceed with you on the outside." He advised them to use

what they had learned with the referendum to demand fairer voting and counting procedures in the eventual presidential election. Nasheed said the party had not made a final decision on its future participation in the system, but that "right now I don't see a bright future, I don't see democracy, I don't see amending the constitution, and I don't see free and fair elections" in the future. Acknowledging Nasheed's frustration, the Ambassador promised "we will work with you and others to hold the government to international standards" in what would be the country's first-ever election of a leader. The United States and others in the international community would seek to dedicate more observers to such a major election, provided there was sufficient advance notice, he added.

18. (C) Comment: The relatively small international contingent that observed the referendum was in no position to judge whether the voter rolls, voting procedures, or the vote count were accurate or fair. The government's continued delay in announcing final results adds to the impression that something was not right. This makes it all the more important to have a strong international monitoring presence for a presidential election in 2008, which at this point appears to be the likely outcome of the referendum. With the Maldives following an unpredictable constitutional and democratic process, post will focus on pressing the government to ensure sufficient advance notice to mobilize a credible international monitoring effort. Ref C also describes the offer by the UN Resident Representative in Male' to organize a UN assessment mission of what steps need to be taken to ensure a free and fair election and constructive participation by international observers.

BLAKE